

Mind the Gap



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LISA KEALHOFER'S ARTICLE in *Asian Perspectives* Spring 2003 (Kealhofer 2003) focuses on the idea that the Hoabinhians of the Malay Peninsula did not merely *forage* in the early Holocene landscape of southern Thailand, but also *managed* arboreal resources and engaged in periodic episodes of forest burning. With these ideas I fully concur. But Kealhofer misunderstands my reconstruction of the course of Malay Peninsular prehistory, and the misunderstanding penetrates the main title of her article: "Looking into the Gap." In her words, she believes that I have claimed that there is a gap in inland Malay archaeological sites between Hoabinhian and ancestral Senoi-agricultural occupations (Bellwood 1997:165, 268).

On page 75 of her article, Kealhofer dates this gap to between 4000 and 3000 B.P. On page 74 she asks if it could be due to the paucity of archaeological data or to a genuine hiatus in prehistoric occupation. She hints that, if the latter, then hunter-gatherers might actually have left the tropics as Holocene humid forests developed. Her final conclusion (p. 88), however, is that the proposed chronological and cultural "gap" (ca. 1000+ years) between the Hoabinhian and the later Neolithic sites is not evident in the environmental record.

Frankly, I am not surprised by these conclusions, because in reality no one has ever suggested that there was such a gap. Although it is referred to frequently within Kealhofer's article, only on page 76 does she offer its source, as pages 165 and 268 of Bellwood 1997 (quoted above). In fact, page 268 of Bellwood 1997 has no reference to the gap concept at all. Perhaps this is a typographical error. Page 165 contains the following text: "According to Sieveking (1954, 1987), the Hoabinhian at Gua Cha was separated by a gap from the overlying Neolithic occupation." But in the next paragraph, I go on to comment: "It seems, however, that Sieveking may originally have overemphasized his concept of a gap between the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic; a more likely explanation is that rapid cultural change took place in the region of the site and that this change . . . involved no very major replacement of population." Sieveking was only discussing the stratigraphy within the single cave site of Gua Cha. Even if there was a stratigraphic gap there (which is rather unlikely, given the findings of Adi 1985), such a gap need carry no implications for a cultural hiatus as severe as a complete depopulation of the whole Malay Peninsula for a millennium or more. Sieveking never claimed such a hiatus, and neither have I.

Somehow, Kealhofer's reading of page 165 of my book has led to misunderstanding, for reasons that are not clear to me. Since the misunderstood "gap" rather dominates the content of the article, I think it is necessary to put it to rest before further confusion occurs. Malay Peninsula prehistory does not need a gap, and indeed never had one, at least not during the Holocene.

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